

John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) 1450–1499



Many parallels can be drawn between the traditional “discoverer” of America, Christopher Columbus, and a lesser-known but equally bold countryman and contemporary, Giovanni Caboto. Like Columbus, Caboto was born to a middle-class merchant family in the mid-1400s in an Italian port city near Naples. He spent part of his childhood in Genoa and later lived in Venice. Similar to Columbus, as part of his role as a merchant on the Mediterranean, Caboto developed his skills as a mariner. Again, as Columbus did, Caboto and his family moved to Spain seeking support for a journey to the markets of the Orient by way of the Atlantic Ocean. As Columbus had learned, the Portuguese were not interested in the transatlantic route. They were committed to the route around Africa.

When Caboto approached the Spanish with his plans for exploration, however, he did not receive the same reaction as Columbus. Columbus already had completed his first voyages, and the Spanish were satisfied they had found their route to Asia. They did not need Caboto.

In 1494, he moved his family to the British port of Bristol, where merchants were already backing modest voyages into the north Atlantic in search of new routes and new trade. These

Bristol voyages in the 1480s may have already reached Newfoundland and Labrador. By March 5, 1496, the King of England had chartered Caboto to lead a voyage of discovery to unknown regions and to claim them for England. Bristol merchants financed Caboto’s expedition.

After his first trip in 1496 was ruined by bad weather, lack of food, and discord among the crew, Caboto (who had changed his name to John Cabot) returned to port and began organizing a second attempt. The new expedition set out on May 2, 1497, on a seventy-foot ship, the *Matthew*. Cabot had a crew of only eighteen men. In five weeks they made landfall in Newfoundland, which Cabot thought was an island off the coast of Asia. There is also some evidence Cabot may have really landed at Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. To this day, Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders still argue over Cabot’s landing site. An important aspect of Cabot’s landing, wherever it was, was that he claimed the land for the British

crown. This claim, as premature as it may sound today, was later the basis for the British claim to its North American colonies.

On Cabot's return, he convinced the king he had reached Asia and convinced King Henry to support another voyage. Cabot was chartered to use as many as six ships of the Royal Navy for this voyage, though he did not sail with that many. In May 1498, Cabot set sail on another voyage. The king provided one ship, and Bristol merchants (hoping to cash in on the Orient trade) funded four other ships.

Historical sources differ, however, on how and where Cabot died. Some sources claim he did not accompany the 1498 voyage, and only his sons made the trip. Other sources claim Cabot was shipwrecked off the coast of Newfoundland and reached shore at Grate's Cove on the northeastern coast of the island. There once was a large rock on the shoreline on which Cabot, and/or his son or crewmembers, supposedly inscribed his name and other information dating to that voyage. The rock was there at least until 1927. After that, it has not been seen since. Some supporting evidence can be found in the record of a 1502 voyage to Newfoundland. An Indian captured there had an Italian sword Cabot supposedly owned and a pair of Venetian earrings that might have been his son's. In any case, John Cabot's fate is still uncertain.

What is certain is Cabot's voyages made it clear that neither he nor Columbus had found new trade routes to Asia, their original goal. While their backers initially may have been disappointed, Cabot and Columbus found gateways to two continents unknown to Europeans. Their discoveries opened many unexpected opportunities for Europeans. These discoveries also would bring disastrous changes for the native peoples of the Americas.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. List three similarities between the life and careers of Giovanni Caboto and Christopher Columbus:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

2. What were two differences between the lives and careers of Giovanni Caboto and Christopher Columbus?

a. _____

b. _____

3. Why do historians sometimes disagree about history?
For example, why is there uncertainty concerning where Caboto landed in North America or how and where he died?

